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ABSTRACT

A teacher reports that during the process of writing a novel, he saw the creative link connecting language, image, and detail. He generated details from the images and language that preceded them. The initial envisioning often flickered erratically until he had generated enough language to place himself in a detailed scene. He has found that in any narrative he writes, the visual and verbal modes of thought run side by side, and a first draft emerges eventually. When revising, he works from the "depicted" vision, however spare those pictures might be. Experiencing his writing enables him to conceptualize what he's doing. He seeks to promote a transaction with words to create meaning from symbols. The details come from language, which comes in turn from images. Teachers should encourage students to practice visual thinking and experience its generative power. Students should be invited to imagine scenes, put those scenes in words, and discuss in class what further images and language those written scenes generate. Students can make the "show, don't tell" approach to writing more than a technique for writing well. They can make it a strategy for thinking well. (SG)

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HOW LANGUAGE, IMAGE, AND DETAIL TEACH

"Show-don't-tell" is an old saw of writing effectively, one oft repeated to me and by me. When I taught the concept in the past, I was entirely concerned with readers. Give them example-rich prose. Appeal to their senses. Dramatize action. Rendering significant detail so readers can experience a scene would make writing resonate for them.

When touting the virtues of detail and specificity now, I don't think primarily of the reader anymore. I think of the writer. Never before in my own writing had I linked the concept of "show-don't-tell" to the generative potential of language and image. Whenever I showed a scene more vividly, I always thought I did so for a reader, some faceless stranger, perhaps, reclining in an easy chair or propped up in bed. I was, of course, writing vividly for a reader, though not a general, unidentified one. I was revealing detail for the writer's first and most important reader. I was

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writing vividly for myself (Murray 164).

During the long process of writing a novel recently--which I titled Blindside--I soon saw the creative link connecting language, image, and detail. An example best shows how this near-magical generation between language and image works. Below is an excerpt from my first draft of Blindside. Nick, the seventeen-year-old main character, and his girl friend, Julie, are alone at Nick's mother's apartment. Nick's sister, Donna, and her two children arrive unexpectedly and let themselves in. Nick hears the door open and runs to the front of the apartment. His immediate problem is keeping two-year-old Angie and five-year-old Gordy away from his bedroom. In the following excerpt Nick has blocked Gordy's dash to the bedroom to get the football he and Nick often play with. Nick has picked up Gordy and returned him to the living room.

Nick set Gordy down on the floor. The child ran to the coffee table. He twirled Nick's literature book around and looked at the picture on the cover. Nick saw Julie's coat lying on the couch.

"Who's that?" said Gordy.

"That's Shakespeare," said Nick.

Gordy looked up and tried out the word.

"Shakespeare?"

"Perfect," said Nick. He looked around at Angie. She was doddling around the kitchen, holding on to the chairs as she walked.

I didn't preplan Gordy's run to the coffee table, but his high energy and earlier impulsive dash toward the bedroom demanded that he move quickly again. Information generated further information. And even though I conceived this action instantaneously while writing, I will describe my thinking processes deliberately.

Once I had written Gordy's run to the coffee table, I wondered why he had done so. Visualizing the coffee table, naming it with language, using it in a sentence and typing it, made the detail dominate my consciousness. The coffee table and the literature book Nick had placed upon it appeared to me like a still from a motion-picture production. Movement became part of the process as I imagined Gordy twirling around the book. Why would he do that, I wondered? What would intrigue him?

High-school literature anthologies usually feature pictures on their covers. Such a picture, I determined, would grab the boy's attention. I had no particular image in mind. But when Gordy looked at the cover, I suddenly realized he would ask the identity of the person pictured. Who would it be? My mind went to Shakespeare, envisioning

the familiar image of him that must have been created in the 1960s: trimmed beard, near handlebar mustache, high hairline, curly side locks, and ear ring.

None of the detail in the excerpt was planned beforehand. No formal outline did I prepare, no hastily jotted notes. I generated details from the images and language that preceded them. This initial envisioning often flickered erratically until I had generated enough language to place myself in the midst of a detailed scene. The erratic flickering during drafting, however, didn't cause me nearly the anxiety that the hours before writing did, especially when I didn't know what images I would follow with language when I sat before the computer. If I were lucky, a couple days before drafting a chapter, images it might contain appeared to me in flashes.

The action of any narrative I'm in the midst of writing is rarely continuous in my mind. I see only a bit of it-- a burst of movement--and seek language that captures that movement. Sometimes words, too, come in bursts and take action farther than I envisioned, language and image occurring so fast I can't tell which arrives first. The two modes of thought--visual and verbal--run side by side like thoroughbreds, first one taking the lead, then the other. While writing, I often imagine reversing the action of a scene and running it again as though I were a film editor hunched over an editing table, reviewing rough-cut footage

on a Moviola. This visual replay aids my search for language to depict action.

Eventually, I have a first draft: language that approximates the vision I generated while writing. When I reread a scene--when I look at it, really--I see pictures that move in a continuous flow, sparsely detailed pictures, to be sure, but visuals enough to spur my mind to generate further images, detail, language, and emotion. I have become a film editor again. But I go a film editor one better.

When I review my narrative, I can not only delete and rearrange material, but also conceive new footage on the spot. I am not working from "possible" vision where there had been nothing, as I often did when constructing a first draft. When revising, I work from "depicted" vision, however spare those pictures might be. Scanning the language I've used induces me once again to visualize scenes. I see what is there and, if I am responding well, what isn't there but should be. I invent new images, rearrange parts, delete one detail to sharpen the effect of those that remain.

Certainly, I'm referring to visual detail, but that isn't all. The act of visualizing alerts me to attendant tastes and textures, sounds and smells. I become aware of the emotions involved, too. I add the detail, the action, the dialog necessary to activate a reader's imagination, the

elements, in fact, that were activated in my imagination as I re-saw my scene during revision. The act of visualizing, combined with the sound and rhythm of language, helps me to experience what I'm writing.

Recently, one of my fiction writing students bore out the importance of a writer experiencing her writing, not merely understanding it. In her portfolio, Dawn included the third short story she had written one quarter because it demonstrated an important breakthrough in her learning. In her portfolio letter Dawn explained: "I have included my story 'An Old Friend' because it was in writing this story that I experienced fictional dream. I may not have created that for my readers, but I experienced the fictional dream myself as I was writing it, and that's what made it exciting for me."

Dawn is on the right track as an evolving fiction writer. Experiencing her own scenes is a necessary step in the process of selecting language so that readers can experience them too.

Experiencing my writing enables me to conceptualize what I'm doing. Language, images, and details teach me. I begin responding to character, plot, and symbol. Here is the scene of Nick, Donna, and the children, now revised as it appears in the final draft:

Nick set Gordy down on the floor. The child

ran to the coffee table, where he twirled Nick's literature book around so he could look at the picture on the cover. Nick saw Julie's coat lying on the couch.

"Who's that?" Gordy poked his finger at the textbook.

"That's Shakespeare," said Nick.

Gordy looked up and tried out the word.

"Shakespeare?"

"Perfect," said Nick.

"Shake spear," said Gordy. "Shake spear. Shake knife. Shake fork. Shake fart." Gordy's eyes went wide. He clapped one hand over his mouth and giggled. "Shake fart! Shake fart!" he chanted, dancing around the coffee table.

"What did Mommy tell you about saying that word?" said Donna.

Gordy continued his dance. "Shake stinker. Shake stinker."

In The Reader, the Text, the Poem (1978) Louise Rosenblatt writes about the creative act of reading. Meaning, she believes, does not exist amid the written symbols on the page and simply pop into readers' passive minds as they scan written language. There is more involved. As readers read, they engage in an active

transaction with words and, by doing so, create meaning from symbols. In transforming mere text into poem, drama, fiction, or essay, it is the reader's transaction with print that is key.

When I revise my own writing, I, too, seek a transaction with the words of my text. I want to arouse images, emotions, and ideas in myself. During my transaction with the first draft of the scene above, I combined the very sound of Shakespeare with what I know about children and their love of language-play to make an imaginative reading for myself, a reading much more detailed and textured than the words of the draft. This new reading, then, I turned into writing.

The interaction between the language of the text and my own knowledge and power of imagination led me to deepen the characterization of Gordy. Spurred by the delight in his own language invention, the child chants and dances, becoming frenetic, not my original conception of him. I describe this as though I had no control over Gordy's character development. I did have control, but it was a curious kind of control. Gordy didn't simply become what I'd predetermined. He became more spontaneous, complex, and interesting because I interacted with the detail and images of my first draft and tried to be responsive to their generative potential.

And those details and images, I must not forget, came

from language; and that language, more often than not, came first from images. In Notebooks of the Mind Vera John-Steiner quotes Gestalt psychologist Rudolph Arnheim: "What makes language so valuable for thinking," says Arnheim, "cannot be thinking in words. It must be the help that words lend to thinking while it operates in a more appropriate medium, such as visual imagery" (quoted in John-Steiner 211).

We translate visual imagery into the language of physical detail--of coffee table, literature book, Shakespeare, and shake fart, in the case of my scene from Blindside. This detail, John Gardner says, "creates for us a kind of dream, a rich and vivid play in the mind" (Gardner 30). That is the fiction writer's chief responsibility--to weave a sustained "fictional dream."

In my case, the creation of a fictional dream is the result of a grand communication between seeing and saying. The two modes of thought--verbal and visual--enable each other. Images spur me to generate language to depict them. That language spawns further images. During this circular process, both language and images gain precision. Characters do and say things that extend plot. These acts generate emotions and actions in other characters as I imagine them responding. Further images and language occur quickly, one mode of thinking answering another, always upping the cognitive ante.

Encourage your students to practice the appropriate medium of visual thinking. Let them experience its generative power, especially when working in tandem with language. Ask students to imagine scenes of their own choosing--those they are familiar with and those that happen for the first time in their minds. Ask them to capture the detail of their visions with specific language. Put some of these scenes--and scenes that you write--on the overhead projector and ask students to practice being transactional readers and report what further images and language the written scenes generate. Let writers re-see their scenes amid small peer groups, then ask them to revise the writing, including the new perceptions that were generated. Students can make "show-don't-tell" much more than a technique for writing well. They can make it a strategy for thinking well.

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